

Vietnam veterans group alleges high-level cover-up on GIs captive in SE Asia

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By Ed Rogers
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A veterans group claims that intelligence documents prove U.S. soldiers are still being held in Southeast Asia and is pressing the administration to seek their release instead of focusing on the return of more GI dead.

The National Vietnam Veterans Coalition planned a press conference this morning near the Republican National Convention site in Dallas to release scores of documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

J. Thomas Burch Jr., national coordinator, said the documents were obtained from the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the State Department and the White House.

"The news conference will present factual, credible and reliable evidence that some of our comrades have not come home from ... Laos and Vietnam, and are still being held in captivity against their will," Mr. Burch said.

A coalition statement made available to The Washington Times said that, as of last July 15, defense intelligence records show there have been 2,620 reports on Americans in Southeast Asia, 640 of them from refugees who said they saw live POWs.

The evidence indicates high-level Pentagon and State Department officials know of the documentary "proof" about living POWs, "but that they have covered up the truth," the statement said.

The documents show that 559 Americans are missing in Laos and that only four remains have been returned.

"Since the Laotian government never was forced to free these men, they are still being held," the veterans' statement said.

This conclusion is at variance with testimony before a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee last Aug. 8 by Lt. Gen. James A. Williams, director of the DIA.

"We are proceeding under the assumption that some Americans are still held and we will always predicate our actions on that basis," Gen. Williams said. "However, we cannot yet prove that any American is now being held captive."

Gen. Williams testified the DIA is checking refugees at their destinations around the world for reports about live prisoners. However, the veterans said refugees complain that they get "rough treatment" when they offer information.

"The Vietnamese refugees are convinced that it will cause them trouble if they come forward with information on POWs," the statement said.

with his own sheaf of documents listing 97 CIA reports of sightings of live American prisoners in Laos and other reports of sightings in Vietnam.

Rep. Applegate, who has gained 270 co-sponsors of a resolution directing the president to account for the missing men, said he was "fearful" that government agencies are "covering up past mistakes and withholding information."

Rep. Stephen J. Solarz, D-N.Y., chairman of the subcommittee on Asian and Pacific affairs, reported that Hanoi had recently released the remains of eight Americans and agreed to resume negotiations concerning further releases.

The Laotian government, meanwhile, is allowing U.S. technicians to search again for possible remains at a plane wreckage site near Pakse, he said.

This focus on negotiating the return of GI dead to the apparent exclusion of efforts to free any live prisoners in Vietnam or Laos was a chief target of criticism by the veterans coalition.

"The U.S. government foreign policies toward Laos have been aimed at improved relations with the Lao government based upon cooperation in searching for remains of Americans who perished during the war," the coalition said.

"This strategy appears to be aimed at recovering remains and forgetting entirely about the evidence that proves that we left live American POWs behind in captivity at the end of the war.

"Now where is the rescue of these live American POWs?" the coalition asked.

The veterans stressed that they did not wish to discredit President Reagan or his administration, saying it "has done the most of any administration to increase the focus on the priority of resolving this POW problem."

But the veterans urged the administration to take the additional step of forming a joint task force with them "to oversee this POW problem's activities."

Citing a remark made by Gen. Eugene Tighe when he was DIA director that a private-sector rescue of a POW would be an "embarrassment" to the government, the coalition said.

"If the president does not form this task force to oversee this POW problem's activities, then this is fair warning that the private sector will probably generate a compromising and embarrassing problem for the next administration."

The National Forget Me Not organization, a participant in the coalition, last March offered a \$1 million reward for the "recapture" of a live POW, the veterans' statement said.